

8-2013

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Recommended Citation

Goe, Rebecca; Ipsen, Catherine; and Rural Institute, University of Montana, "Vocational Rehabilitation Transition Services in Rural Areas" (2013). *Employment*. 25.

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August 2013

Research Report

Vocational Rehabilitation Transition Services in Rural Areas

The receipt of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services as students transition out of high school may be an important predictor of post-graduation success (Harvey, 2002; National Council on Disability, 2008). In rural, limited job opportunities and limited access to counselors intersect to create a challenging VR service environment for transition youth. While 2008 and 2009 case services data indicate that a greater proportion of clients are transition aged in rural versus urban counties (RSA 911, 2009), rural transition students fall behind their urban counterparts in rates of employment and enrollment in postsecondary education following graduation (Harvey, 2002). This fact sheet reports findings from interviews with VR counselors, supervisors, and administrators regarding rural transition service delivery.

Methods. In 2011, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 82 VR informants to explore rural service delivery strategies. Informants, including 4 supervisors, 21 counselors, 20 administrators and 37 area managers represented 48 agencies in 37 states. Interview transcripts were coded using the qualitative data analysis software NVIVO 2.0. Although the interview questions did not directly address transition services, 73 informants voluntarily referred to it, reflecting its importance in rural VR service delivery.

Outreach. Almost half of the respondents (n=33) identified outreach as a logical and necessary first step for effectively serving rural transition students. Although formalized agreements at the state level have helped facilitate the coordination of services with other agencies (n=25), informants described local connections as imperative to making these agreements work (n=18).

In some cases, relationships with rural schools were compromised by large service areas (n= 6) and variation in the eligible student population from year to year (n=2). For example, one informant said he served 15 students across 30 schools; this highlighted both the distance traveled to serve rural schools as well as the difficulty in maintaining relationships with schools that have no students in need of services. Six informants reported serving schools across multiple counties (ranging from 8 to 22 counties). The logistics of traveling across so many counties limited the amount of contact counselors had with each transition student.

Informants said connections with school officials (n = 9) and transition teams (n = 4) were important for maintaining connections in rural areas. These contacts served as the counselor's eyes and ears in the schools and helped sustain relationships in the absence of VR counselors. In contrast, eight informants described poor relationships with schools that resulted in delayed or absent referrals.

Service Delivery. Service delivery was generally structured as a counselor assigned to individual schools (n=7), a counselor assigned to a specific territory who served multiple schools (n=9), or a dedicated transition

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counselor who served multiple schools across a region (n=6). Informants said a dedicated transition counselor spent more time in the schools and had more opportunity to develop relationships with students and school officials. In comparison, general counselors who also served transition youth developed longer lasting relationships with their students as they followed them out of youth services and into adulthood. Regardless of the service delivery model, VR's involvement with transition youth generally began in the student's junior year or earlier (n=35). Only seven informants from five agencies indicated that they connected with students during or after senior year.

Informants (n=26) described participation in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting as the primary form of contact with transition students. However, three informants said it was becoming more difficult or impossible to attend IEP meetings because of limited resources. One informant described an agreement with the schools to develop all IEPs in a 10 day period. Although exhausting, this method allowed counselors to attend the maximum number of meetings despite limited travel resources.

Four informants said they were unable to provide services to certain students because of order of selection criteria. Students with less severe disabilities often remained on a waiting list until well after graduation resulting in a significant gap in services.

Career Counseling. In rural, as in urban areas, eligible students generally received either career or college counseling. Sixty-seven informants described job experiences as a large part of career counseling while students were still in school. Job experiences were either school supported (n = 16), VR supported (n = 22), or jointly supported by VR and the school (n = 29). Jointly supported programs may have been especially effective in rural areas where there were not enough students to warrant a full-time VR counselor or employment counselor. For example, in one rural area, schools supervised job experiences, but VR counselors assisted with identifying job sites. This arrangement benefited students and VR by facilitating a job experience while still in school and allowing VR to have a presence at out-locations without the cost of travel.

Six informants said work experiences were only available to students who were not college bound and/or were in an occupational track at school. These students generally attended classes about work and participated in some community work experiences (n=7). Eight informants described situations in which students worked at multiple job sites. Job experiences reportedly helped students develop and refine their

employment goals and helped VR understand the student's interests.

Informants noted difficulties to setting up job experiences in rural areas due to limited counselor resources (n = 2) or the need for transportation arrangements to and from worksites (n = 2). Additionally, two informants discussed the impacts of the "No Child Left Behind" policy; schools were less willing to provide occupational tracks so that students could attend classes that prepared them for standardized tests. To overcome this, some VR counselors coordinated with students outside of school hours.

Job exploration included interest testing and reviewing the labor market and related salaries (n=2). In addition, students who were blind or vision impaired (n= 9) could spend time at a summer camp where they learned soft and independent living skills required to keep a job. Informants said these programs provided rural students the opportunity to become familiar with assistive technology they would not have been exposed to otherwise.

Conclusion. This paper described some of the difficulties and solutions developed by VR agencies and counselors regarding the provision of transition services in rural areas. Although transition services were not the focus of the larger research study, unsolicited comments about rural transition services seemed worthy of highlighting.

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© 2013 RTC:Rural. Our research is supported by grant #H133B080023 from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, U.S. Dept. of Education. The opinions expressed reflect those of the author and are not necessarily those of the funding agency.

